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ABSTRACT

Five years ago Los Angeles Unified School District administrators began efforts to ensure that teachers teach students what they are expected to learn and test them accordingly. The initial stage of this projected curriculum alignment was first of all to define the essential skills to be taught in the elementary grades and provide a list of these skills for each teacher; the second step was to develop a means of assessing student progress; the third was to develop an easy-to-use system for scoring and presenting data. Four years later, 238 schools and more than 7,000 teachers are participating in the instructional planning process, which now includes five stages: (1) establishing teacher consensus on essential skills objectives for each grade, (2) setting specific instructional priorities, (3) planning instruction, (4) checking progress, and (5) acknowledging accomplishments and planning next steps. Beneficiaries of curriculum alignment include not only students but principals and district administrators as well. Curriculum alignment in a large school district is likely to be most successful when an outside agency is brought in to help, when teachers feel the change is their idea, and when change efforts remain relatively flexible. (JBM)

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ACHIEVING CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT
IN SCHOOLS

A Presentation to the American Educational Research
Association 1983 Annual Meeting

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ACHIEVING CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT IN SCHOOLS

Curriculum alignment means that we should teach students what we expect them to learn and we should test students on what they have had an opportunity to learn. While this principle sounds simple, implementing it throughout a school district is extremely difficult. This paper describes how curriculum alignment is being implemented in the elementary schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District. It also describes some of the factors which can help or hinder curriculum alignment.

How it Began

Five years ago, administrators in the Los Angeles Unified School District, working with a number of us at the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (SWREL), identified some critical problems related to basic skills instruction in the elementary schools.

- * Teachers received little guidance about what they were to teach the students at each grade level. As a result, students in different classrooms were likely to learn significantly different sets of skills.
- * Many students were working well below grade level.
- * Many teachers at the end of the year, still had not "covered" a significant portion of the textbooks.

- * Students, teachers, and the entire district were being evaluated on the basis of standardized tests which measured some but not all of what was being taught. These tests also measured what was not being taught.

District administrators decided that although much good instruction was undoubtedly going on, it was difficult, if not impossible, to know how good the instructional program was and where help was needed. In order to build an information base that would help answer such questions, the District began to align their curriculum. This was done in three steps. The first dealt with objectives, the second with assessment, and the third with instruction.

In the first step, the essential skills to be taught to each student in each of the elementary grades were defined. The skills covered 13 subject matter areas. They were defined in terms of specific student skills and the entire list was printed and bound into a thick three-ring notebook titled, "Elementary School Curriculum: A Balanced Program." This document was distributed to each elementary school teacher in the district.

The second step was to develop a means of assessing student progress with respect to District-defined essential skills. SWRL, working with the District, developed surveys of these essential skills for six grade levels and for three subject-matter areas: reading, mathematics, and written composition. Each of these surveys included a representative sample of the instructional objectives at that grade level. The item formats were the same as those typically found in textbooks. This was done so that the skill was being measured rather than the ability to deal with a new format. Finally, a system was developed by which the data could be scored and presented in a easy-to-use form by teachers, principals and district administrators. Teachers and principals received reports describing student achievement for each grade level in the school. Teachers also received separate reports for individual students. Students completed the survey in May and results were available for teachers and administrators before school began in the fall.

This, then, was the situation four years ago. In math, reading, and written composition, the District objectives--the essential skills--in reading, math, and written composition were aligned with the assessment. We knew that there was still one very important piece to bring into alignment--the instruction being given by the teachers. Providing teachers with the list of essential skills and the data on how well students were achieving those essential skills, would not, in itself, make a significant change in the content of the instruction. At least, that was our opinion based upon a good bit of anecdotal evidence.

We realized that the goal of getting teachers to change what they were teaching was the most difficult step in the alignment process. In order to determine how best to go about this, the district selected two pilot schools with which SWRL staff could work. Each school had a highly respected principal whose primary concern was the academic achievement of the students. The principals of these schools joined District administrators and SWRL staff in the initial meetings, during which the project objectives and procedures were collaboratively defined. During the year, the pilot schools helped develop a set of instructional planning activities for teachers.

The Current Situation

Now, after four years of refining the alignment activities, 238 schools and more than 7,000 teachers are participating in this instructional planning process. At each school, principals appoint one or more of their support staff to act as the coordinator of curriculum alignment activities. This coordinator and the principal are, over the course of the school year, invited to five two-hour meetings during which they receive the training and materials that enable them to assist teachers in the instructional planning process. There are five steps in this planning process.

Step 1: Reviewing the Essential Skills

The first step is for teachers to become familiar with the objectives--the essential skills for their grade level. It is usually very helpful for teachers to work in grade-level groups, discussing the essential skills and making sure that they have a consensus on what those objectives mean in terms of classroom instruction. It is also critical for each teacher to have a clear and concise list of the essential skills.

Step 2: Setting Priorities

The second step is for teachers to identify specific priorities for instruction. While all of the essential skills need to be included in the instructional program, it is usually helpful to identify a small number of skills to receive special attention. The assessment results of students taught the previous year will usually show that certain skills need to be emphasized. Also, teacher judgement about the special needs of incoming students are important for setting priorities. The process stresses the importance of teachers working together (usually in grade-level groups) in order to set these priorities.

Step 3: Planning Instruction

Once priorities have been set, teachers (again, usually in grade-level groups) plan instruction for the year. Planning helps ensure that adequate time, as well as appropriate strategies and materials, are devoted to instruction on the essential skills. Teachers determine which instructional strategies are likely to work best, which instructional materials are most appropriate, and the time that is likely to be needed for instruction.

Step 4: Checking Progress

During the year, teachers are encouraged to continually monitor their progress in teaching the essential skills, but at least once, no later than midway through the school year, teachers should meet formally to discuss their progress. Progress needs to be evaluated in terms of the extent to which the teachers' plans for instruction are being implemented. Teachers may also want to use a midyear test to determine student progress toward learning the essential skills. This type of teacher evaluation provides a basis for making necessary revisions so that all students can receive instruction in essential skills before the end of the school year.

Step 5: Acknowledging Accomplishments and Planning Next Steps

Near the end of the year, it is useful for teachers to have an opportunity to identify their accomplishments in teaching essential skills. This is also an appropriate time to discuss problems that have arisen during the year, and to identify ways to minimize or eliminate these problems in the future. The faculty can work together to develop an action plan for improving instruction during the subsequent school year.

The Benefits of Curriculum Alignment

The most obvious benefit of curriculum alignment is that more students have an opportunity to learn more of the essential skills at grade level. Teachers have a better idea of what is important to teach and what skills are most important for students who enter the class. They also have a better understanding of what they and their colleagues teach well and what they don't teach so well. Teachers are also better equipped to communicate with parents regarding the instructional goals and achievements for the year.

Curriculum alignment can help a principal become a strong instructional leader. The process provides a structure by which teachers plan instruction so that such planning does not have to be done or imposed by the principal. Alignment activities also help the principal articulate the goals of the entire school and keep the focus on instruction.

For district administrators, alignment activities can build an information base that allows them to describe the accomplishments of the school district and to target instructional support where it is really needed.

Lessons Learned

After managing this project for four years, I have come to several conclusions about the process of change in a large city school district. First of all, change often requires the help of an outside agency. Change managed from the inside of the organization will be the responsibility of and be perceived as belonging to a particular group. Because of this, such efforts can easily get caught up in bureaucratic machinations which may severely limit the amount of change that takes place.

A related principle is that an outside agency can be most helpful if it is dedicated to making people inside the district look good. Standing in the wings and letting someone else take the bow is better than not being on stage at all.

Third, implementation in most classrooms will only happen if teachers feel that the change is their idea. For this reason, any effective change effort must provide only a structure in which teachers can plan the specifics that must change.

Fourth, something new is not necessarily something better. Many school personnel are very tired of being told to throw out something that does work and replace it with somebody's bright idea of what might work. Change efforts must be flexible enough to accommodate what is already successful.

Finally, change requires both a bubble-up and trickle-down approach. The bubble-up refers to the teachers and principals who have to be sold on an idea and shown how it can work for them. They will then sell it to the people above them in the bureaucracy. The trickle-down refers to the superintendent who has to say "this is what we're going to do and I'm going to keep up-to-date on how we're doing." A significant amount of change will not occur over the long run unless both of these strategies are in place. The corollary of this principle is that it is the midlevels of the bureaucracy that have the greatest resistance to outside-orchestrated change.

Conclusion

Los Angeles School District personnel, whether they are teachers or district administrators, now speak of curriculum alignment as "their program." There is widespread understanding that the five-step instructional planning process must be standard operating procedure for all elementary school teachers in the district. Although there is a long way to go before the elementary school instruction is completely aligned, the District's achievements to date have been a unique step forward for a large urban school district.